



Artisan teacher NOTES

Time and Timing

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Definition. The ability of the teacher to appropriate the optimal amount of time to each instructional element, choose the most effective interval between elements of instruction, and utilize instructional elements at just the right place in the lesson to optimize their efficacy.

Elaboration. Timing is everything. The difference between an adequate experience and an excellent one is often found in the timing of the elements that comprise the experience, not so much in the elements themselves. This is particularly true of anything that is transactional in nature, where the essential action is found in the interplay of two people or combinations of individuals and groups.

Good timing is critical in stand-up comedy, public speaking, and storytelling. A successful auto salesman knows when to transition from shopping to buying (Oldroyd, McElheran, & Elkington, 2011). Musical composition is just as much about the spaces between the notes as the notes themselves (Goodridge, 1999). Effective parenting of teenagers requires one to choose the right time for sensitive discussions. Sports superstars do well to time their retirements with care, leaving the sport just before they tarnish their legacy. In all these cases, something transactional is occurring between or among people. And, in all instances of human transaction, it is the timing of things, not only the things themselves that leads to a successful outcome.

Teaching, of course, is highly transactional. Each school day is filled to the brim with human interaction. Teachers interact with students. Students interact with one another. Teachers and students interact with educational materials and technologies. In all these transactions, the difference between adequate outcomes and excellent outcomes is often the teacher's command of time and timing.

To better understand and apply the techniques of time and timing in the classroom, it is helpful to break the concept down into three component parts: *duration*, how long to do something; *interval*, how long to wait before doing the next thing; and, *readiness*, when to do something.

Duration. A comedian develops her “act” to last just under eight minutes. She designs three short pieces into the act at 45 seconds each, two longer pieces at ninety seconds each, and one ending piece that covers 2:45. She begins with a 45 second piece, then uses the two 90 second stories, then to another 45 second joke. She finishes with her best material after the audience is suitably warmed up—a brilliant 2:45 story with a wicked twist at the end. The audience screams for more, but the comedian always leaves them wishing she would tell just one more joke ... she never does (Rutherford, 2009a, p. 2).

What is the optimal duration for an instructional device—a question, an experience, a written assignment, a discussion group, a hands-on activity, a cooperative learning structure, etc.? The optimal time is usually to end the device just ahead of the learner’s dip in energy and interest, just like the comedian. All instructional devices have an energy curve over time. Typically, classroom activities start slow, build in energy and intensity, reach a maximum, and then begin to decline. An excellent time to end an activity is just before the maximum, not after. Why is this? There is a relationship among time, energy, and efficacy in every classroom (Matchock, 2010). When one episode of teaching ends just before the peak, the students can transfer the upward trend in energy to the next learning opportunity. This provides for a high energy closure for the preceding activity and a high energy beginning for the next one.

Interval. A well-timed interval allows enough time for the audience (learners) to engage with the device- to complete a thought, to imagine an answer, to conjure a word-picture. The purpose of the interval is to clear the brain’s working memory for the next set of items through a moment of transition (Rowe, 1974).

A rousing political speech has a flow to it. The key sound bites are surrounded by filler, transition, and water-treading. Too many nuggets delivered too often would overwhelm the listeners, too few would bore them. There is an optimal balance between nugget and filler and an optimal interval between each nugget. In stand-up comedy this perfect interval is called a comedic beat, just the right length of pause to set up the punch line.

In the well-timed classroom, transitions, wait time, segues, and pauses are designed to provide just enough time to extend thinking, but not enough to invite distraction (Smith, 1988). As a general guide, transitions between activities should be shorter when the activities are similar, and longer when the activities are different (Atwood & Wilen, 1991). A longer transition is particularly helpful when the activities look similar but are not. Negative transfer and misconception abound when there is inadequate time between confusing concepts (Hunter, 1982). In a fine restaurant, the waiter will offer a palate cleanser, perhaps a bite of sorbet, between courses - a nice transition that prevents negative taste transfer.

Readiness. A successful salesperson doesn't go for the close when she is ready, but times the close to match the client's readiness. Likewise, a successful teacher looks for cues that the learners are ready for the next learning experience instead of simply following the pacing guide or lesson plan. Ten minutes of instruction delivered at a moment of peak readiness may be worth 100 minutes of instruction delivered at another time. Students can be ready *cognitively*, meaning that they are intellectually ready for the coming task. They can be ready *emotionally*, meaning that their affective state is a good fit for the type of learning to be experienced. They can be ready *experientially*, meaning that they have relevant and recent real-life experiences that can support and structure the new learning (Bredekamp & Shepard, 1990). Teachers should also consider students' energy readiness (Weith & Zacks, 2011). At 2:15 pm, after a morning field trip, a late lunch, and a big test, the students (and teacher) may be ready in every other way, but there is just not enough energy available for success. "Let's start this tomorrow morning when we're fresh," the teacher says. It's all about timing.

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